2 Corinthians 10:4-5 *Preach to Yourself: Take Every Thought Captive*

***Yet I…***We are starting a new series of messages this morning, and to help you get a sense of where we are going I want to share how the idea for this series came about.

For my Thanksgiving message back in November I used **Habakkuk 3:17-18** as my text:

**17**Though the fig tree does not bud
    and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
    and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
    and no cattle in the stalls,
**18**yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
    I will be joyful in God my Savior.

This has been one of my favorite Thanksgiving verses for a quite awhile, especially in years that have seemed particularly difficult. I’ve always been impressed with Habakkuk’s resilient faith. Even though his fig trees are not budding, even though there are no grapes on the vine, even though his crops have failed and his barns are empty; Habakkuk is still resolved to rejoice in the Lord. His joyfulness is going to defy his circumstances. Because of his relationship with God, he can be grateful even if he is having a hard time coming up with material blessings to count.

And the words that really stand out to me in these verses, the words that really drew my eye, are the words at the beginning of verse 18: **“Yet I…”** Habakkuk says: “Even though the fig tree does not bud…Yet I will rejoice.” ‘Yet I…”

A couple of years ago I did a series I called “But God…” We looked at passages in the Bible that give bad news, and then counter that bad news with the good news of what God has done. The Bible often introduces those explanations of good news with the words “But God…’

And as I looked at Habakkuk, I started to wonder if we had something similar going on. The Biblical author describes his bad news circumstances, and then declares his intention to cling to the good news of God’s love. ‘Yet I…” It’s the same idea as “But God…’ only expressed differently. Here, it is Habakkuk’s intention to remind himself of God’s good news despite the bad news around him.

So I went looking for other examples of the phrase “Yet I…” in scripture. Other places where the Biblical authors counter bad news by reminding themselves of the good news. I started imagining a sermon series I was going to call “Yet I…”

In fact, I even had Lori mock up some potential graphics. I thought maybe we could **play off a certain move franchise.** “Yet I…’ sounds a lot like Jedi.

Or, the two words “Yet I” look a lot like the one word **brand on those coffee mugs and water tumblers that are so popular.** But, then again, that could get confusing. I don’t want you thinking about light sabers or abominable snowmen. Not to mention the copywrite issues we might run into.

Then, as I was doing some reading to prepare for this series, I came across this quote by an author named **Paul David Tripp:**

“No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. We never stop talking to ourselves….The things you say to you about you, God, and life are profoundly important because they form and shape the way you then respond to the things that God has put on your plate.”

I realized that is really the heart of the series I want to do. In all of these passages that I found where the phrase “Yet I…” or something similar is used, the Biblical authors are really talking to themselves. Not just talking, preaching. They are acknowledging the painful truth of their reality—they feel overwhelmed, stressed, worried, angry, and so on—yet they resolve to remind themselves of God’s greater reality. Their self-talk focuses more on God’s truth than their circumstances.

You see, we all keep a running dialogue going in our heads. As Paul David Tripp says: “nobody talks to you more than you.” What I want to do in this series is challenge us to think about what we tell ourselves. Especially when things are hard, Especially when circumstances are less than ideal.

What do we tell ourselves? Do we tell ourselves that the world is out to get us? Do we tell ourselves that we are no good? Do we tell ourselves that nobody can fix our situation but us, and so we better start fighting back?

Or do we remind ourselves of God’s goodness, faithfulness and love? Do we talk back to ourselves? Do we preach the truth of the Bible to our souls?

The series is going to be built around passages that use the “Yet I…” phrase or something similar. Those are really the words I want you to latch onto. We need to learn to say, like Habakkuk, “yet I rejoice in the Lord.” If you want to think of this as the “Yet I” series, that would make me happy.

But for a series title I settled on the phrase **“Preach to Yourself.”** And, for a graphic, we settled on this image of a mirror with a talk bubble. Because that’s the big idea**: Nobody talks to you more than you; so what you say to yourself matters.** The messages you communicate to yourself shape your view of God, life, and the world. So you need to make sure you are communicating God’s truth to yourself. You need to make sure you are countering the bad news you run into every day with the good news of the Bible.

***Captive Thoughts***Each week, then, the Bible text is going to be a “Yet I…” passage. Places where the biblical authors resiliently choose to preach the good news to themselves in spite of tough circumstances. But today, I want to focus on why it is important that we preach to ourselves. Not just talk to ourselves, but intentionally preach to ourselves the good news of the Bible. And for our text, I want to take us to **2 Corinthians 10:4-5**:

**4**The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. **5**We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

First, a little context. In this passage Paul is defending his ministry against some false teachers who are using Greek philosophy and rhetoric to make it appear that Paul-–and, more importantly, the message of Jesus—is unsophisticated and foolish. So, there is a battle, of sorts, taking place. That’s the metaphor Paul is using. A warfare metaphor. It’s not a physical confrontation. More like a battle of wits. It’s a warfare of ideas. That’s what I understand Paul to mean by “strongholds.” There are these different worldviews, different systems of thinking, and they are like strongholds, fortresses, that the different sides are doing battle from.

And what Paul is saying is that when he comes to Corinth, he is going to demolish these strongholds. He’s not going to use Greek philosophy or rhetoric (the weapons of the world) but he’s going to use the knowledge of God to expose the weakness of these other ideas and worldviews. And, in doing so, he is going to change the thinking of the Corinthians so that their every thought will become obedient to Christ. In other words, he is going preach the truth of Jesus so that their thinking will be held captive to Christ.

I think the metaphor provides a good description of what goes on in our heads pretty much every day. Every day, as we move through life, we need to make sense of the things we see and experience. We have this internal dialogue running through our heads where we are deciding how we are going to think and feel about things.

And there are different worldviews—different strongholds, if you will—that might cause us to react to things in different ways. A worldview of worry, perhaps, that can only focus on how things could go wrong. Or a worldview of envy, which is constantly comparing our circumstances to those of others who appear to have it better. Or a worldview of anger, which is constantly blaming others for our struggles and plotting ways to get revenge.

These ideas and others are constantly running around in our heads like enemy soldiers taking potshots at our joy, our satisfaction, and our peace. Sometimes they can even stage a coup and takeover our thinking completely.

But when Paul says that he will “take captive every thought and to make it obedient to Christ” what he means is that we must counter these different worldviews with the truth of the Bible. This is what I mean when I say that we must preach to ourselves. Instead of letting these different ways of thinking run loose in our minds, we must capture them and get them in line with Jesus. It’s a prisoner of war image. We need to round up these enemy soldiers and put them in shackles. Stop letting worry or envy or anger or whatever run the show; but preach the good news of the Bible to ourselves.

I want to break this passage down to draw out three important principles about preaching to ourselves. Three things to keep in mind as we begin this series.

***Self Preaching, Not Self Help***First, **we do not fight with the weapons of the world.** As I begin this series about preaching to yourself, I need to point out how it is different from what is known in the secular world as positive self-talk.

Some of you will remember a Saturday Night Live character named Stuart Smalley. He was a nebbish, nerdy character played by Al Franken who wore cardigan sweaters and hosted his own TV show called “Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley.” Every show would begin with Stuart looking into a mirror and saying “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!”

It was a gentle send-up of the idea that we can make our lives better through the power of positive thinking. The self-help movement is based on the idea that we can achieve self-salvation through the right self-talk. Tell yourself you are good enough and smart enough often enough and eventually it will be true.

And, of course, it is important to have positive self-talk. Like I said at the beginning, nobody talks to you more than you. So what we say to ourselves matter.

But what we are talking about here goes beyond telling yourselves things you want to be true or hope to be true. This is more than giving yourself a mental pick-me-up. This is preaching to yourself the truths of the Bible. This is replacing wrong thinking with Godly thinking.

This is not a call to speak affirmations in the mirror or boost your self-esteem. It’s a call to be careful how you think because thoughts have consequences. Positive self-talk (that discounts reality) is not going to help us. But *truthful* self-talk is

In fact, one of the most abundant sources of false thinking is our own minds. Rick Warren cautions us not to believe everything we think. He says:

We naturally feel that if we think something, it must be true because it comes from within us. But just because you think something does not make it true… So many different suggestions can come into the mind. The world puts suggestions in our minds that are false, and we are bombarded with those false ideas all the time. And, of course, Satan makes suggestions all the time. But your problem is much deeper than Satan. Everybody has a mental illness. We are all mentally ill. The mental illness is called sin.

He points to **Jeremiah 17:9** which says:

**9**The heart is deceitful above all things
    and beyond cure.
    Who can understand it?

Then Warren goes on to say:

We have an amazing ability to lie to ourselves. You do it all the time. So do I. We lie.

We tell ourselves that things aren’t as bad as they really are. We tell ourselves that things are better than they really are. We tell ourselves that we’re doing okay when we’re not doing okay. We’re telling ourselves it’s no big deal when it is a big deal. In fact, the Bible tells us that you cannot be trusted to tell yourself the truth. (<https://www>.desiringgod.org/messages/the-battle-for-your-mind)

When I talk about preaching to ourselves, then, I’m not talking about simply using the world’s weapon of the power of positive thinking. Rather, I’m talking about using the truths of the Bible to re-channel your thoughts in line with what God says is real.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was an influential preacher in the mid-20th Century. For 30 years he was the minister of Westminster Chapel in London. Before he became a preacher he was a medical doctor. He wrote a book called *Spiritual Depression* in which he talked about the importance of talking to ourselves with God’s truth:

I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing “ourselves” to talk to us! Do you realize what that means? I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I just trying to be deliberately paradoxical? Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. (quoted by John Piper, *Future Grace*, p. 304)

**You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down — what business have you to be disquieted?’ You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’** — instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged himself to do. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/speak-the-truth-to-yourself>

What I am urging us all to do is self-preaching, not self-help. Take that mental soundtrack that loops in your mind a chorus of worry, doubt and fear and replace it with the stern, clear truth of God. Say: “Self! Listen up! Instead of constantly listening to you, I will start talking to you!”

***Looking at the World Differently***Which leads to a second principle: **we demolish strongholds with the knowledge of God.** The point of preaching to ourselves is it allows us to get a bigger picture than just what is immediately before us.

One of the most famous experiments in psychology is what is known as the “invisible gorilla.” Researchers asked volunteers to sit down in front of a video screen. On the screen are six people, three wearing white shirts and three wearing black shirts. They have two basketballs. The volunteers are told that when the video starts the people on the screen will start passing the ball amongst themselves. The volunteer’s job is to count the number of passes that are made by the people wearing white shirts.

Then the video starts, and the people in white start mingling with the people in the black and both teams start passing the ball to each other. It’s fairly confusing and takes a fair bit of concentration to keep the white team’s basketball separate from the black team’s. The video is only about 40 seconds long, and in the end the correct answer is 15 passes.

But what is truly remarkable is that about half-way through the video a man in a gorilla suit walks into frame, stops in the middle of the two teams and thumps his chest, and then walks off again. If you know to look for him, he is pretty much impossible to miss.

And yet, after the volunteers gave their answer on the number of passes, they were asked if they saw the gorilla. An astonishing 50% admitted they had not. When they are shown the video again, they are dumbstruck that they could have missed something so obvious.

Psychologists call this selective attention. Sometimes we can get so locked in on a detail or that we can miss whole swaths of other information. This is one of the reasons, for example, that four different people can be eyewitnesses of the same car accident and give four completely different descriptions of what happened.

I think something similar happens in the stories we tell ourselves. When things happen to us—especially negative things—we can become so focused on our worry or despair or fear that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Our world becomes reduced to that negative thing and we can’t see past it. Suddenly everything in our worldview is seen through the lens of that negative event, and it becomes the dominant theme of our inner dialogue. This is what leads to feelings of hopelessness or anger or depression.

But when we bring our knowledge of God into the story, we can see a bigger picture. By preaching to ourselves the truth of God’s Word, we can pull our attention off our immediate situation and gain a broader perspective.

That’s why I love the “Yet I…” of **Habakkuk 3**. Habakkuk could have been laser focused on his barren fig trees and empty wine barrels. He could have been done in by the failed olive crop and the empty livestock pens. But he refuses to allow that to be the end of the story. He preaches to himself about the LORD’s faithfulness. He reminds himself that he has a Savior. He looks to the LORD for strength.

He challenges his inclination to be depressed and despairing with the knowledge of God. David Mathis writes:

In our sin, we constantly find our responses to life in our fallen world to be disconnected from the theology that we confess. Anger, fear, panic, discouragement, and impatience stalk our hearts and whisper in our ears a false gospel that will lure our lives away from what we say we believe. The battleground is between our ears. What is it that is capturing your idle thoughts? What fear or frustration is filling your spare moments? Will you just listen to yourself, or will you start talking? No, preaching—not letting your concerns shape you, but forming your concerns by the power of the gospel?...

There is a difference between merely reminding ourselves of truth and preaching to ourselves the truth of the gospel. It’s true that two plus two equals four. But it does very little to feed our souls. What we need is not just truth, but the truth, the message of the gospel. What preaching the gospel to ourselves requires is pausing, rehearsing some expression of the Father’s and Son’s love and provision of goodness and rescue and joy for us, and consciously seeking to have that truth shape and permeate our reality. (*Habits of Grace*, p. 42)

***Active, Not Passive***Which leads to this third principle: **we must take every thought captive in Christ.** This is not a passive activity, but an active, vigorous fight. We are not victims of the thoughts that run through our heads. We are not powerless, but we can fight with the power of God and the spiritual weapons made available to us in the Holy Spirit. We can preach to ourselves. We can tell ourselves what to dwell upon.

It’s significant that Paul tells us, in **2 Corinthians 10:5**, to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. Because Christ, in His work on the cross, is the key. It is the gospel—the good news of salvation in Jesus—that we must remind ourselves of again and again. John Piper writes; “Hearing the word of the cross, and preaching it to ourselves, is the central strategy for sinners in the fight for joy.” (*When I Don’t Desire God*, p. 91)

Jerry Bridges was an author and leader of the Navigators movement who often repeated the phrase: “Preach the gospel to yourself everyday.” In his book “The Discipline of Grace” he invites the reader to imagine two different days.

One he calls a “good day.” It is a day when you begin your morning with prayer and Bible reading and then you go through your day feeling incredibly close to God. It is a day when you resist the urge to snap at your family and where you leave an incredibly generous tip for your waitress. A day where it feels easy to act like a Christian.

The other day Bridges asks us to imagine is a “bad day.” It is a day when you don’t have time for your Bible and only mumble a brief prayer at the breakfast table. It is a day when thoughts of God don’t cross your mind and you fall back into an old pattern of sin that you thought you had gotten rid of. It is a day where you barely remember that you are a Christian at all.

On the “good days,” it is tempting to feel proud. We start to think of ourselves as good people, and we begin to think that God is pretty lucky to have us.

On the “bad days,” it is tempting to be wracked with guilt. We start to think of ourselves as worthless, and we figure God wouldn’t want anything to do with us.

On both days, says Bridges, what we need to do is preach the gospel to ourselves. **He writes this:**

Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God’s grace.

We need to preach the gospel to ourselves, every day.

On our good days, the days we feel like we have this Christian thing on lock down, we need to remind ourselves that we are sinners, and that it was our sin that made the cross necessary.

On our bad days, the days when we feel like we’ll never do anything right, we need to remind ourselves that God loves us, and He sent His son to rescue and redeem us.

But either way, everyday, we need to preach the gospel to ourselves.

Nobody talks to you more than you. So we need to pay attention to the things we tell ourselves. We need to take control of our self-talk—take every thought captive—and make it obedient to Christ.